

Thinking with the number 50

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The fact that this issue of *Omnibus* is number 50 set me thinking about the bit of Greek history that scholars call the 'Pentecontaetia' or 'Fifty-year Period'. What is it? When is it? What's special about the number 50? Well, there is no reason, really, why the word 'pentecontaetia' could not have been applied to any fifty-year period of the Greeks' past. But so far as the surviving evidence goes, it was applied to just one: the period or rather interval between two great wars, as that period was identified and interpreted by its greatest historian, Thucydides of Athens. The wars in question were the Persian Wars of 480–479 B.C. as we call them (or the 'Median Affairs as their historian, Herodotus, preferred to say), and 'the Peloponnesian War' – in homage to Thucydides. From his Athenian viewpoint, the latter was a war against the Peloponnesians and was *one* war rather than several beginning in what we now call 431 B.C. So, the Pentecontaetia was the period from 478–432 inclusive.

Doing the sums

Yes, you are right. 'The 50-year Period' did not in fact run for fifty years, but only forty-seven (on inclusive counting). Not that Thucydides, of course, should be blamed for being poor at sums – it was not he but ancient commentators on his work who applied the term to the period covered by what since the Renaissance has been known as Book I of his work, chapters 89–117. On the other hand, Thucydides certainly was largely or solely responsible for all the other problems associated with these chapters. For they are in a sense a departure from the main chronological line of his narrative, a digression designed to explain and justify his view of why the (or rather *his*) Peloponnesian War broke out as and when it did. Not that modern scholars can agree on just what Thucydides's view actually is of the causes of and responsibility for the outbreak of that War in 431 B.C.!

Suddenly we are caught up in one of the greatest problems involved in all history-writing: how to explain the most major human events and processes. And at its heart lies another of the historian's most typical and fundamentally important problems, namely how to divide up the seamless past into meaningful chunks known as 'periods'. Of course we can't do more than begin to solve these problems here. But we can at least start from the fact that 'the Pentecontaetia' has become an established notion in modern historical writing about the fifth century B.C. (itself a modern construction, of course, the B.C./A.D. distinction being meaningless to Thucydides and his contemporaries living four or more centuries before the life and death of Christ). Just what is the justification, or basis, for speaking of the years 478–432 B.C. as a historically distinct and distinctive period?

Shaping history

Well, as mentioned already, it all pretty much depends on Thucydides – on how we read his text, and how authoritative we take him – or what we understand him to be saying – *to be*. To me, at any rate, the initial date of 478 seems more seductive than the latter in marking an era or highlighting a significant historical turning-point. The repulse of the Persian invasions of 490 and 480–479, as described and explained by Herodotus, does seem to mark the end of one era and the beginning of another. Had the Persians not been repulsed, then much of what we think

of as 'Classical' Greek history would have been very different, and that in turn would have meant much of subsequent Western history too. For example, the political and cultural achievements of the Greeks post-479 (the flowering of democracy and drama at Athens and elsewhere, the building of the Parthenon at Athens and the temple of Zeus at Olympia, or the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle) either would not have occurred at all, or would have occurred in a less impressive fashion – so that, to take just one of those, the history of Western philosophy would have been dramatically different.

What about the lower terminus, 432 – the year, that is, *before* the outbreak of what has come to be known as the 'Peloponnesian War' (431–404)? I put it like that because there had already been another long war of Athens and its allies against 'Peloponnesians' led by Sparta between about 460 and 445, within the so-called 'Pentecontaetia', and because within Thucydides' one Peloponnesian War there were at least two distinct phases (431–421 and 413–404) interrupted by several years of admittedly uneasy peace or truce (421–413). So actually it's mainly due to Thucydides' powerful presentation of the past that we, like him, think of there having been just the one 'Peloponnesian War'. And we have to remember that Thucydides had powerful reasons for wanting to make 'his' War come out that way.

He came from a Greek culture that was deeply and at its heart competitive. His Athens was one of the foremost competitors in a competitive Greek world, and intellectual competition was by no means the least intense of the types of competition going on at Athens in the second half of the fifth century. Thucydides' ambitions were second to none. He chose, as a writer, to take on and outdo not only Herodotus and his 'Median affairs' but also Homer and his ten-year Trojan War. Thucydides himself makes his competition with Homer explicit. As for Herodotus, he was careful to belittle him as far as he could by putting him down in a number of ways without actually mentioning him by name. So Thucydides' 27-year (3x9) war trumps both Homer's and Herodotus' wars in terms of its length, obviously. But it was also, in Thucydides' view, bigger, more comprehensive, than theirs – and its effects, correspondingly, were magnified. This was indeed the biggest Hellenic war ever, as he himself puts it right at the start of his work.

That, then, is the general context within which his Pentecontaetia has to be read. For its purpose within the work was to justify the twofold claim that Athens' power had within this period grown to heights unprecedented in all previous Greek history, and that it was the Spartans' reaction to their perception of this Athenian power-growth that somehow explained the outbreak of war in 431 – that is, for Thucydides, the outbreak of 'the' Peloponnesian War.

So, what started out by being a mere matter of quantity (fifty years more or less – *less*, in fact, rather than more) has turned into the most major matter of quality imaginable. So much hangs – or can be made to seem to hang – on the issue of how historians divide historical period from historical period. It's a relief therefore to be able to assert in conclusion without fear of challenge, let alone refutation, that this little article will appear in quite a different sort of issue, the 50th issue of *Omnibus*.

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